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ABSTRACT

The last 10 years have been a distinctive decade in American education. There was much argument for change in the 1950s, but it was Sputnik that sparked action in the field of education. The assumption at that time was that if the U.S. was technologically "behind," the schools were to blame. Federal funds for schools began as an "emergency" measure. These funds were renewed year after year until, by 1964, they had taken on the characteristics of a permanent federal allocation. By the end of the Kennedy administration and the beginning of the Johnson administration, "national defense" was perceived in more subtle terms. It became evident that there were also domestic problems that could cripple our society. Equality of educational opportunity became very important. Much legislation was passed at that time and the field became saturated with innovations. In a few years, however, students began protesting "lack of relevance" and it was alleged that differences among schools didn't make much difference. We have now entered a period of reaction--a desire to "return to the basics." To advocate a return to "traditional" education, however, is to ignore all that has been learned in the past 10 years. Specifically, we know that each student has differing aptitudes for different subjects. The task for the 1970s is not to go back to basics; it is to use well-planned programs of educational improvement such as individually guided education (IGE) to move forward to basics. (PB)

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FORWARD TO BASICS

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to the

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FORWARD TO BASICS

Until a while ago, I thought that the period from about 1963 to 1973 was one of the most interesting and professionally challenging in American educational history. Recently, however, I have begun having second thoughts. It may be that this decade will prove to be even more interesting and challenging--but it will, I suspect, be a lot less comfortable and a lot less fun, for both good and bad reasons.

For I suspect we have entered upon a period of reaction in American education. How long that period lasts will depend on two factors: the skills of educators in responding to that reaction; and the perception of parents in evaluating the causes--real and imagined--for that reaction. Both skill and perception will be required to maintain the momentum for educational improvement that began in the Sixties.

I have no hard data to back up my assertion that we have entered a period of reaction--just instinct, backed up by discussions with colleagues around the country and a noteworthy indicator here and there. In its October 21 issue, for example, Newsweek magazine published a lengthy article titled "Back to Basics in the Schools." The article cited a number of instances in which such innovations as open education, independent study, and so-called "relevant" additions to the curriculum had been rejected by parents in favor of a return to "traditional" schooling, characterized by letter grades, regular examinations, strict discipline, and a stress on the three R's.

One highly innovative school in Pasadena, California, the article pointed out, has a K-through-12 enrollment of 550 students and a waiting-list of 515. But at another Pasadena school, whose stated goals are "Traditional education, order, quiet, and control," the enrollment is 1,700 and the waiting-list is over 1,000.

"What is the significance of this astonishing contrast?", the article asks, and then offers an answer: "To many, it suggests that U.S. education's so-called wave of the future has crested. The result is that all across the nation, parents, school boards, and often the pupils themselves are demanding that the schools stop experimenting and get back to basics--in reading, writing, arithmetic, and standards of behavior to boot."

Just as one swallow doesn't make a summer, so one article doesn't make a trend--and yet my own conversations with parents and colleagues incline me to believe that Newsweek is right: there is disillusion with many areas of educational experimentation and innovation abroad in the land. It is likely that all

of us here will be forced to make our intellectual peace with this phenomenon, if we have not already done so. What I would like to do this evening, therefore, is to summarize my view of what has gone right--and what has gone wrong--with educational innovation during the past ten years.

For the last ten years have been a distinctive decade. More happened in American education between 1963 and 1973 than between 1898 and 1908, or between 1931 and 1941.

It all began with Sputnik. By now, most educators are tired of the word, and resent the implication that everything fresh or new in American schools began with the launching of a Russian rocket. As a matter of fact, American educators had been arguing, during much of the 1950's, that American schools needed to be changed in some dramatic ways. This was based on the performance of schools up to that time. The seeds for reform had been planted.

What Sputnik did was to pour water on the seeds. In less metaphorical terms, Sputnik supplied the political interest and financial muscle that the reformers could not. For the first time since World War II, when an adolescent America had dazzled the world with its swift assemblage of industrial might and technological skill, somebody else had beaten us to a technological "first". Not only were the American people embarrassed and irritated--but we were scared. Under those conditions, politicians who had paid no attention to education in the past, suddenly began listening very hard. For the assumption was that, if our technology had failed, our schools must be the cause.

Even though the assumption does not hold up, the reformers didn't complain--for suddenly, they were getting the popular concern and the money they needed to improve the American school. It came first in the form of the National Defense Education Act, signed in 1958 by President Eisenhower, and it was intended as an emergency measure--a quick, temporary injection of federal funds that would dry up as soon as local and state boards of education could recover their initiative. Until that time, federal expenditures for the schools were looked on with deep suspicion--as an entering wedge of Big Government that would inevitably lead to Socialism. [Parenthetically, let me point out that one of the outstanding advocates of federal aid to education was the late Senator Robert Taft, of Ohio--a man no one ever accused of being a Socialist.]

At any rate, the "emergency" measure was renewed year after year by Congress, until--by 1964--it had taken on the characteristics of a permanent federal allocation. Moreover, the original restrictions on NDEA--which limited it to support for scientific and technical aspects of curriculum--had been

relaxed to include the humanities and a brace of other disciplines unrelated to technology.

All this legislative analysis may be of no interest to anyone other than political scientists. In point of fact, however, the continuance and broadening of federal aid signaled an important shift in our national attitude toward education. As its title implies, the National Defense Education Act stated that education was vital to our national defense; originally, it viewed national defense in terms of hardware. We had to have rockets and missiles and nuclear submarines to match those of our actual or potential enemies; therefore, we had to have engineers and scientists and technicians who could produce such armaments. If state and local school systems, through oversight or inability, could not educate such specialists, the federal government would have to help them do so. Incidentally, much of the political rhetoric of that time demanded that the schools should stop frittering away their funds and effort on frills, and should return to the basics.

But by the end of the Kennedy Administration and the beginning of the Johnson Administration, we began to perceive "national defense" in more subtle terms. We saw that the enemies of the United States were not entirely external and military; some of them were internal, and quite civilian. Russia, Cuba, and a militant Communism should keep us on our guard, true; but so should such home-grown threats as poverty, inequitable distribution of income, and racial injustice. These threats, too, we decided, could cripple our society; these injustices at home posed a challenge to national defense. The problem was to open up and enlarge opportunity for large segments of the population to whom real opportunity had previously been denied.

The nation delegated a large part of the responsibility for solving that problem to education. Other steps had to be taken: the Constitutional right of all adult Americans to vote had to be enforced--and it was; job barriers built on ethnic restrictions had to fall--and they began to fall. And yet, we realized, no legal steps to make equality of economic or political opportunity real, would succeed without equality of educational opportunity.

And so, in the mid-1960's we saw a host of laws passed that went far beyond the original intent of NDEA. Those were exciting days to be in education.

What had once been a quiet trade, proceeding placidly and predictably from school year to school year, seemed now saturated with innovations: the new math, programmed learning, team-teaching, non-graded classes, classrooms-without-walls, cross-age teaching, multi-media packages, even computer-based instruction. More and more newspapers, which had once regarded education coverage as ritual reporting of the school-bond election, now found it necessary to assign a reporter to the school-beat full-time. The cover of Time magazine, for the first time in memory, carried the portrait of the U.S. Commissioner of Education.

Yet after a few years of enthusiasm, something happened. Our colleagues in higher education, after rhapsodizing about their acquisition of new dormitories and electron microscopes and language-and-area centers, suddenly found themselves confronted with a student generation that refused to be impressed by all these academic goodies. While university administrators fretted about a new creation called the "multiversity"--at times, its major problem seemed to be student parking--the students themselves marched to protest what they viewed as the "lack of relevance" in the curriculum. President Johnson, once confident that we could afford guns and butter both, now thrashed around in a quagmire composed of Vietnam and civil disorders, Weathermen and Black Panthers, and a growing restiveness caused by a fear that we had tried to go too far, too fast. The recognition dawned on us that the resources of the United States--while, perhaps, still greater than those of any other nation--were nonetheless limited. A certain mood of self-doubt, of disillusion, crept over the land.

Particularly was this true in education, as a result of the publication of a few, highly publicized studies. The Coleman Report, the Moynihan Report, and the Jencks Report all suggested that our strenuous efforts to improve the nation's health through education had failed; differences among schools, it was alleged, simply didn't make much difference. And educators were further pummeled by such books as Death at an Early Age and 36 Children which indicated that some schools and their teachers might be doing positive harm.

In sum, it's a trying ten years we've come through since the high enthusiasm of 1964 and educators can be forgiven if, now and then, they survey what they tried to build in that time and find nothing but the wreckage of past efforts.

Well, as usual, the truth lies somewhere between the extremes of fulsome praise and savage criticism. My view is

that the nation's enthusiasm for education during the last ten years produced some solid gains--not as much as we had hoped, to be sure, but solid progress nonetheless. And the danger to further progress is that we may lose that sense of enthusiasm and of purpose that motivated us in the 1960's. It's not all wreckage--and it may be time to look back, put some of the pieces together, and see what we have built.

Most qualitative studies of American education compare one group of American students with another. They may compare 1960 fifth-graders with 1965 fifth-graders; or they may compare a number of groups of 1965 fifth-graders with each other; or they may compare the New Math with the Old Math, and so forth. Rarely however, do we go beyond the boundaries of our own nation to see how other students are faring.

This is what an organization called the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement--the IEA for short--has been trying to do for some time. It was on the basis of the IEA's first international survey, about ten years ago, that Japanese children were reported to excel all others measured in math and a few other areas.

You may be interested to know that Torsten Husen, chairman of the IEA and an education professor at the University of Stockholm, now refers to that report as "a fiasco." The findings themselves were solid enough, but the interpretation given them by the general public wrenched the findings badly out of context and did an injustice to American schools. A look at the 1973 findings, the most recent, will help us understand why.

In this survey, data were collected from 258,000 students in 22 countries, including all the major industrialized nations of Western Europe, plus Australia, Israel, and Japan. The latest survey, too, has some disquieting news for American educators. In reading comprehension, for example, American high school seniors ranked 12th--12 out of 22, a quite mediocre showing. But as Dr. Husen pointed out with regard to the 1964 survey, raw test-scores alone risk giving an inaccurate impression of a nation's educational achievement. When we consider the proportion of the youngsters from each nation who are still in the classroom by the last year of high school, and analyze whom we are comparing to whom, the United States does quite differently.

At present, 75 percent of our 18-year-olds graduate from high school. This is the highest percentage in the world. And when we look around at retention practices in other nations, we see that a majority of them utilize some type of sorting-out process early in a child's school career, to decide who is to pursue an academic track, and who is to pursue some other kind

of vocational track. Thus the high school seniors from these nations tend to be an elite.

Well, we have our elite, too, and as the IEA study shows, if scores for reading comprehension are limited to the top nine or ten percent of American high school seniors, we find that--wonder of wonders--they outperform the top nine or ten percent in all the other 21 nations.

The IEA report contains some not-so-good news, too. The top group of American high school seniors ranked only seventh in science as compared with the elites of other nations. Perhaps this should concern us, perhaps not; seventh out of 22 is still a respectable showing.

Much of educational success is largely a matter of state or local emphasis. It would seem to me that if we wanted to reverse priorities, and give science a much higher priority, then I am sure we can improve these scores. The question is, do we want a substantial majority of our students to excel those of other nations in science? Or is a substantial minority enough to guarantee our continued scientific, technological, economic, and military security?

Science does not stand by itself. Other nations, in other times, have asked their educational institutions to produce a few great musicians, great sculptors, great warriors, and great diplomats--while leaving the majority of their youngsters to fend for themselves. Ours was the first in human history to insist that our schools should take all American kids as they find them, and turn them into great citizens. This may sound like a formula for democratic mediocrity; while cranking out great citizens, however--bankers, salesmen, advertising copywriters, truck-drivers, male-chauvinists and women's libbers--we have also managed to produce more than our share of great writers, great scientists, great businessmen, great doctors, and great poets.

Reviewing the IEA findings, Fred Hechinger--former education editor of the New York Times, and now a member of its editorial board--comments that:

> The most vocal challengers of American education make their judgments from an essentially provincial point of view. While they are entirely justified in exposing those policies and attitudes which have discriminated against the poor and against minorities, they have tended to characterize such deficiencies as peculiarly American sins. A look at the schools of

other industrialized nations--such as Germany, England, and France, where stratification is still far more rigid--placed the American achievement, with all its shortcomings, in a different light.

What is the American achievement in education?

Simply stated, it is that we have tried to educate a larger portion of our population than any other nation--and we have succeeded in doing so. Including students as well as teachers and administrators, education today is the principal occupation of 62 million Americans--30 percent of us. And despite the disenchantment that may strike us as we look back to 1964 and compare the high hopes of then with the skepticism of now, it's worth taking a look at how far American education did move in those years.

* During the 1963-64 academic year, 466,000 received bachelor's degrees; for 1973-74, the figure was 958,000--a 106 percent increase.

* In the fall of 1964, 5,280,000 Americans were enrolled part- or full-time in some form of postsecondary education; by the fall of 1974, the enrollment figure was 9,568,000--an 81 percent increase. More than one-third of our young people aged 18 to 21 are in college, and 60 percent of our high school graduates are enrolled in a degree-credit program.

* In 1961, 85 percent of our teachers had bachelor's degrees; today, 97 percent of them do, and nearly 30 percent have master's degrees.

Virtually all of these statements, to be sure, are quantitative measures; they suggest how accessible education is, not how good it is. Some solid critics have posed some excellent questions for which educators have, at present, no answers. But we also know some things that they either have forgotten, or never knew--things that make a so-called "return to basics" a foolish and harmful educational strategy.

We know, for example, that in any class of 25 fifth-graders, reading skills will vary by as much as five years; that is, the poorest achievers will be reading at the fifth-grade level, while the best will be reading at the seventh-grade level. Clearly, any reading program pitched at the non-existent "average" student will prove frustratingly difficult for the worst readers, and boringly easy for the best. Uniformity of instruction is bound to fail for some of the youngsters, at both the top and the bottom ends of the scale.

Similarly, we know that students have differing aptitudes for different subjects: An excellent reader can prove quite mediocre in math, and vice-versa. We know that students respond differently to different instructional media: not everybody learns well from a book, nor does everybody learn well from a film. We know that when children enter our schools, they differ markedly in both physical and mental maturation levels. We know that, though these personal differences require instructional differences, they require alternatives in education,and most schools are not organized to respond to these differences.

Finally, we know that teachers differ. Some are excellent lecturers, some are not. Some are stimulated by outstanding students and respond well to them, while others have a special gift for diagnosing the learning difficulties of slow children.

On the subject of change we know that: In order to recognize the individual needs of youngsters, the motivation for such change must come from the individual school level. School superintendents cannot impose it by pronouncement nor elicit it by pep-talk; they are too far removed from the scene of the educational action to make sure that their orders or their dreams are being carried out. Conversely, we know that most individual teachers cannot sustain a change-program in their isolated classrooms. The dynamics of a school--by which I mean the whole pattern of professional regards, professional jealousies, and simple human morale that operates within a school and gives it a distinctive personality--will inevitably crush the change-efforts of the lone teacher who tries to act differently. It seems that only an entire school, with the staff united on what they propose to achieve, and a principal determined to facilitate their attainment of those objectives, has the critical mass of educational resources at hand to make change work. Even the school, however, needs support to sustain its efforts. To survive it needs to be part of a league--an alliance of like-minded schools, each committed to change, which may or may not all be members of a single school district.

By now, you will have recognized some familiar aspects of the IGE system. They were developed from information acquired these past ten and more years through responsible research efforts.

We think that the IGE system works well, as is indicated by its remarkable acceptance around the country and from the data assembled from various evaluation efforts. With your help, we will make IGE better.

However, considering what seems to be a widespread reaction against innovation and experimentation, it may be worthwhile to review precisely what IGE is for.

It is not change for its own sake. A change, by definition, is any departure from what has gone before--but changes can be for the worse, as well as for the better. And it seems to me there is a distinct danger is mistaking the form of educational innovation for its purpose--in concentrating so hard on achieving the I/D/E/A 35 IGE outcomes, for example, that we forget the underlying reason for those outcomes in the first place. That reason, broadly, was dissatisfaction with traditional ways of helping children achieve desirable educational goals. And these goals included the Basics.

The point may seem obvious, but it is clear from such criticisms as the Newsweek article, that some educators in some places have become so enamored with the process of innovation that they have forgotton its purpose. The innovations inherent in IGE were not chosen at random, or in response to passing educational fads. Each was fitted within a logical framework designed to accomplish a single, overriding purpose---that of matching each youngster's individual differences with a distinctive program tailored to his needs and interests, strengths and weaknesses. Questions about the system, and about its departures from tradition, can be answered--for every one of those departures has a reason.

As any number of current discussions in the media show us, parents are concerned about basic skills--and they should be. They are concerned about their own children, not about our standing as one nation compared to others--although they might take some pride in this standing. Teachers and principals in IGE schools should be able to respond to parental demands for simple, solid education.

On the other hand, we need not apologize for the innovative features of IGE, nor should parents feel their children are being used as guinea pigs for irresponsible experimentation, just because IGE schools differ in important ways from others. As in many other fields, so in education: the "good old days" weren't really as good as our memories paint them. Three weeks after the Newsweek article was published, this response to it appeared in the "Letters to the Editor" column:

> If traditional education was so successful, why were so many kids turned off before we ever heard about open education? The total process of educating our youth will only be a reality when the educational system becomes compatible with what is known about child growth and development. This can only be done by changing the system, not by moving back to a method that failed before.

That, it seems to me, is the cardinal point for educators and parents to remember as we respond to calls for a "return to tradition": traditional methods did fail before, for large numbers of students. Granted, some educational innovations did not prove wise for all students. Granted, some old-fashioned methods have a great deal of merit to them. Regular drill in the multiplication tables and with the verbs of foreign languages, for example, are absolutely essential to gaining facility in those activities. It is intellectually important for future mathematicians to understand why eight times seven is fifty-six; but it is essential for all students to know immediately that eight times seven is fifty-six. There is a need and a place for proper drill procedures.

But it is a far step from recognizing the value of some traditional practices, to asserting that all traditional practices are best. Applying rote-drills to all subjects is not only unnecessary, but inhumane...and much of current educational change is based on the idea that schooling can be made more effective, more interesting, and at the same time more accountable.

Learning is a discipline, and we are never going to be able to convert the entire process of schooling into fun. At the same time, learning can be an engrossing process, one of genuine intellectual and emotional pleasure. I suspect every one of us has had the experience of discovering, later in life, that some subject that bored us in school proved to be quite fascinating when we were introduced to it in a different way. As a boy, Albert Einstein found mathematics quite dull; it was his uncle, teaching young Einstein tricks with numbers, who awakened the future genius's interest in mathematics.

In a sense, the thrust behind much educational innovation is to find ways to enable every teacher to do--by intention and training--what Albert Einstein's uncle did by instinct. Geniuses are probably born, not made...but well-educated men and women are made, not born. Through programs such as IGE, we are trying to convert education from a hit-or-miss proposition into an effective, logical sequence of activities that gives every youngster the chance to discover his or her own abilities, and to convert them from possibilities to realities.

Thus, while responding intelligently and warmly to the genuine concerns of parents who have seen some foolishness perpetrated by self-styled "innovators," we must continue to defend the necessity for continued improvement through educational research and development. And, while

continuing to question "innovations" that seem to lack any logical base--and this they should do--parents should recognize that many so-called "traditional" methods are also foolish, and can be improved on.

The task for schooling in the 1970's is not to go back to basics. On the contrary, its task is to use well-planned programs of educational improvement, such as IGE, to move forward to basics.